

February 27, 2003

**SUBJECT: HORSETHIEF HAZARD FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT**

**PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:**

The Billings Field Office and Eastern Montana Fire Zone propose to carry out a hazard fuels reduction project in an area of overstocked ponderosa pine west of Roundup, Montana. The area is in the wildland-urban interface where a fire start would present a risk to life and property. Between 50 and 100 structures are located near the area selected for treatment. The project area is appropriately 5,911 acres. Treatment methods could include mechanical and/or prescribed fire.

The cooperative project involves area landowners, rural fire departments, county government, industry, and the BLM working to develop alternatives for the management of the area's forest resources.

The project is one of the Department of the Interior's and the Department of Agriculture's "test drive" projects of new guidance issued December 9, 2002, on the preparation of environmental assessments (EA) for forest-health projects and is a Healthy Forests Initiative project.

**ISSUES:**

Some Horsethief area residents are initially opposed to the project because they don't want the "natural state" of the area disturbed or question whether the project will be effective in protecting private property if private landowners don't also implement fuels reduction projects.

Other residents support the project and some are interested in reducing fuels on their private property.

**MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:**

An environmental assessment on the project is being prepared and should be completed early this summer.

The BLM has already been contacted by contractors interested in performing the work and from the timber industry regarding the potential for wood products.

The BLM has funds available to assist landowners with fuel reduction efforts and to help rural fire departments purchase equipment.

In order to maintain the conditions created by the proposed treatment, the area would need to be retreated in 10-20 years.

In addition to the Horsethief project, Montana BLM will continue to identify projects to implement the Healthy Forest Initiative in collaboration with other federal agencies, state, tribal and local governments, interest groups, local fire organizations, and private landowners, and permittees

**BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:**

Director Kathleen Clarke supports this initiative. She states it will provide for expedited environmental reviews and full public review processes, while ensuring that the projects are carried out efficiently and effectively. She also believes it will preserve the principle of partnerships with local communities and local interests through the use of collaborative processes that include all stakeholders and partners at the local level.

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